

Tough Question Week 17 – Where is God When I’m Dying?

Tim Perry, Pastor of Spiritual Discovery at Christ Community Church. I want to welcome you to Week 17 of Tough Questions.

We’ve been reading through the Psalms in our Project 4:4 reading, and one of the things we discovered last week is that the Psalms are painfully honest writings. They give full voice to the full range of our feelings emotionally. They bring our emotional world into a full view of God and how God feels about life as well.

Well, our question this week touches on a very emotional subject and it comes right out of today’s reading, April 24th. The question I want to deal with today is – where is God when I’m dying?

I’m going to read you the whole Psalm. It’s so deep and so rich that I don’t want to shortchange you a single phrase of it. Listen along and see if you don’t hear in here echoes of a person dealing with a terminal illness or a person lying on their deathbed.

Psalm 88:

¹ LORD, you are the God who saves me;
day and night I cry out to you.

² May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry.

³ I am overwhelmed with troubles
and my life draws near to death.

⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like one without strength.

⁵ I am set apart with the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
who are cut off from your care.

⁶ You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.

⁷ Your wrath lies heavily on me;
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.

⁸ You have taken from me my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them.

I am confined and cannot escape;

⁹ my eyes are dim with grief.

(Very honest feelings of despair and hopelessness) The Psalm goes on to say this:

I call to you, LORD, every day;
I spread out my hands to you.
¹⁰ Do you show your wonders to the dead?
Do their spirits rise up and praise you?
¹¹ Is your love declared in the grave,
your faithfulness in Destruction!?

(Can you hear some of the sarcasm in the Psalmist phrases?)

¹² Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

¹³ But I cry to you for help, LORD;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
¹⁴ Why, LORD, do you reject me
and hide your face from me?

¹⁵ From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;
I have borne your terrors and am in despair.
¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me;
your terrors have destroyed me.
¹⁷ All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.
¹⁸ You have taken from me friend and neighbor—
darkness is my closest friend.

I was talking to one of my colleagues here at Christ Community Church the other day, and in dealing with a death in his family – his loved ones shared with him an interesting phenomenon that lines up with what we just read out of scripture. His mother-in-law said to him, “You know, my whole life long, I have felt close to God. Why is it that now at the end of my life, I feel like God is nowhere to be found?” Isn’t that ironic - somebody who walks closely with God, who loves God, who longs to be with God is actually feeling abandoned and cut off from God at the very end of their life?

Well one of the things we know for sure from reality and from life looking around us and even from scripture is that death is an undeniable certitude for all of us – we’re all going to have to face death. I don’t know if you’ve thought much about it, but there will come a day when your heart is going to stop beating. Where is God when that happens?

This past year, I’ve lived through the sad experience of saying goodbye to both of my parents – my Mom first and then about six months later – my Dad. My Mom and my Dad had two very different experiences with death. With my Mom – my Mom was growing more and more sick with each passing week – we knew that the end was coming. I got a phone call from my family saying that you’d better get

home because things don't look. And I traveled home. It took me eight hours to get home. I got to my Mom's side at about 1:30 in the morning. My Mom greeted me, and my Mom perked up a little bit. She knew that her last boy had come to see her in the hospital and say goodbye to her. So for the next several hours – my brothers, my Dad and I – we clung right to my Mom's bedside. And I watched as my Mom took her last breaths. I was holding her in my arms. I thought what a peaceful way to pass from life into death – in the arms of your loved ones – with everybody around you that you love and that you care about the most.

Well, when my Dad passed away six months later – I got a phone call from my wife. My wife said that she had some news for me and that she wanted to give me that news in person so she drove across town and met me. And I'll never forget meeting up with my wife and having her look at me with tears in her eyes telling me that my Dad had died. My Dad died alone in his home. He, from all of the evidence we could tell, died a fairly rapid death, but probably a pretty painful death. He died of a heart attack.

So one of the things we're just not given as a Christ follower is that our death experience is going to be radically different than anyone else's. Everyone dies – some peoples' death experience is very painful. Some people's death experience is very peaceful – like my Mom's. But the thing that God doesn't do in scripture is abandon us in our death. It's a statement of our faith to believe against our emotional feelings at times to believe that God is near the dying. Jesus himself had an experience with death that felt like an abandonment. But even though it felt like an abandonment – death did not have the final victory – not in Jesus case and certainly not in our lives if we believe in God and we trust the work of Christ for us.

If God didn't spare his own son a painful and desolate experience with death, He's probably not going to guarantee us – no matter how faithfully we follow Him – a death experience that's necessarily comfortable. Listen to what Jesus said. Jesus while he was on the cross suffering his own physical death quoted from one of these lament Psalms just like I read. Here's what Jesus said while he was suffering and giving his very last (Psalms 22):

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?

² My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.

³ Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.

⁴ In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.

⁵ To you they cried out and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

⁷ All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

(You can just see the experience of Jesus on the cross in these words that were penned by a Psalmist hundreds of years before Jesus' death experience)

⁸ "He trusts in the LORD," they say,
"let the LORD rescue him.

Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."

⁹ Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.

¹⁰ From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.

¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

Well, theologically speaking, we all know that death is a consequence of the fall. Because of what happened with Adam and Eve in the garden, death is an enduring and permanent consequence in our lives as human beings. All human beings will experience death. But death is only a temporary victory for the Christian. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians pens this: *"For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man."* (In Paul's view, resurrection is the answer to death's permanence.) *"For as in Adam, all die, so in Christ, will all be made alive. All who believe and put their faith in Christ will be resurrected like Christ. But, each in turn, Christ the first fruits, then when he comes - those who belong to him, then the end will come (get this - get what happens to death - our ultimate enemy in the end) the end will come when he hands over the Kingdom of God to the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power for He (that's Jesus) must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. (get this) The last enemy to be destroyed is death."*

So let me summarize. First of all, we all are going to experience death. We can't dodge it, we can't deny it and we can't pretend that it's not going to happen. Second of all, God does not promise us a spiritually comfortable experience with death. No matter how much we trust Him and love Him. Third, the best way to prepare for death is to walk closely with God throughout our whole life. Death is going to be a big trial - a big dark doorway to walk through. We're going to feel abandoned from God, but we shouldn't let that keep ourselves from trusting in God - from walking closely with God to prepare for that day. Finally and fourth, death is

not the ultimate reality. Death itself has been disarmed and defeated, and one day it's going to be completely eradicated and destroyed.

Well, if you've had any thoughts about death – or your own death – or being there in the experience of death with people that you love and you want to write about that, would you hit on the comment button and send me some of your thoughts. I'd love to interact with you about this.

This has been Tim Perry, Pastor of Spiritual Discovery, at Christ Community Church. Thanks for watching.